



Factsheet #1

Literacy in Canada

Almost 50% of Canadian adults can't work well with words and numbers.

Canada and the International Adult Literacy Survey

In June 2000, Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released the final report from the groundbreaking 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The first international survey of its kind, IALS provides a comparison of literacy levels across nations, languages and cultures.

Canada and 19 other countries participated in the survey, which defined literacy as the ability of adults to use written information to function in society, to achieve their goals and to develop their knowledge and potential. IALS identified and measured three types of literacy:

- **prose literacy:** the ability to understand and use information from texts such as news stories or fiction;
- **document literacy:** the ability to find and use information from documents such as maps or tables;
- **quantitative literacy:** the ability to make calculations with numbers imbedded in text, as in balancing a chequebook.

Canadians' Literacy Levels

IALS measured proficiency at five different levels (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) within each of the three literacy types. Here is how Canadians, aged 16 and older, measured up in prose literacy:

- **22% of Canadians were at level 1.** These people have difficulty reading and have few basic skills or strategies for decoding and working with text. Generally, they are aware that they have a literacy problem.
- **26% of Canadians were at level 2.** These are people with limited skills who read but do not read well. Canadians at this level can deal only with material that is

simple and clearly laid out. People at this level often do not recognize their limitations.

- **33% of Canadians were at level 3**, which means that they can read well but may have problems with more complex tasks. This level is considered by many countries to be the minimum skill level for successful participation in society.
- **20% of Canadians were at levels 4 or 5**. These people have strong literacy skills, including a wide range of reading skills and many strategies for dealing with complex materials. These Canadians can meet most reading demands and can handle new reading challenges.

How Canada Compares

- On the prose literacy scale, Canada ranked 5th among the 20 countries surveyed, behind Sweden, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands.
- On the document and quantitative literacy scales, Canada was closer to the middle of the pack, ranking 8th and 9th respectively.
- Canada consistently outranked the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand on all three literacy scales.
- Canada was second only to Sweden in terms of the proportion of adults aged 16 to 65 at the very highest literacy levels.
- Among Canadian participants there was a large range between very high and very low scores on the prose literacy scale. IALS showed that the discrepancy between people with low and high literacy skills was far larger in Canada than in European countries such as Denmark, Norway, Germany, Finland and Sweden.

What Else Did We Learn from IALS?

- Literacy development is strongly influenced in the early years by a child's family environment and the educational background of parents.
- The higher a nation's literacy skills, the more likely its population is to have healthier habits and lifestyles.
- Those with higher literacy skills tend to be more involved citizens who participate in their communities and in society.
- Literacy is linked to economic success. Literacy levels determine the kind of jobs people find, the salaries they make and their ability to upgrade their work skills.
- Literacy also contributes to society's overall economic and social performance.
- Literacy is not fixed asset. It operates on the 'use-it-or-lose-it' principle. Like muscles, skills can deteriorate if not used. Those who read, write and use numbers regularly have higher literacy levels.
- Education strongly influences literacy but is not the only factor. Some less-educated people who practice their literacy skills regularly have higher literacy levels than well-educated people who do not practice their literacy skills.

Canada's Literacy Challenge

Over 10 million Canadians are working at marginal or modest levels of literacy. This represents a massive loss of productivity for individuals, for society and for our economy especially as we enter a future where knowledge and adaptability will be essential. But the situation is even more complex. Many with low literacy skills manage well in their lives and may not see themselves needing any help at the moment. Many others (estimated at 10 to 15% of Canadians) require specialized help for learning disabilities. For the 5 – 10 % of less literate Canadians who do come forward for training there are significant socio-economic barriers and burdens to overcome. Even well-intentioned literacy programs cannot address these without appropriate resources and a broader social shift. Since literacy is about all of us, the challenge for Canadian society is to truly become a culture of lifelong learning. **Literacy is for life.**

Suggested *Canadian Literacy Resources*

- ✓ International Adult Literacy Survey. Report called *Reading the Future* is available online through Statistics Canada at www.statcan.ca or tel: 1-800-263-1136.
- ✓ Movement for Canadian Literacy, online at www.literacy.ca or tel: 613-563-2464.
- ✓ National Literacy Secretariat, online at www.nald.ca/nls.htm or tel: 819-953-5280.